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News

Friday, December 01, 2006

Set for stability

Foster parents provide transition

By Audora Burg
Sturgis Journal

Published: Friday, December 1, 2006 12:13 PM CST
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Foster parents Bernie and Ame Hale receive a certificate of recognition and appreciation from St. Joseph County Probate Judge Thomas Shumaker. "(The Hales) had done an amazing job to get the family (of four foster children) ready for permanence; they were willing to make the effort long-term. Not just the Hales, but they are a symbol of

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the people who do that. Getting kids ready for that stability," Shumaker said.

Editor's note: This is the last in a series about adoption.

BURR OAK - When Ame Hale's cell phone rang, she wasn't surprised.

Her husband had called to say they would be getting four foster children that night.

At that moment, she was in the Wal-Mart parking lot, watching police load the children's parents into a squad car.

"It's ironic she was there," Bernie said.

Two-and-a-half years later, the Hales were helping the children load up again.

This time, they were moving to join their new adoptive family.

"It's an ideal placement," Bernie said.

"They're just fantastic. You can't say enough nice things about them."

Broken to whole

*Bernie and Ame play a unique role in the adoption process: to **nurture foster children** from brokenness to wholeness so they become "adoptable."*

Legally, as soon as parental rights were terminated, these four children were free to be adopted. But emotionally or socially?

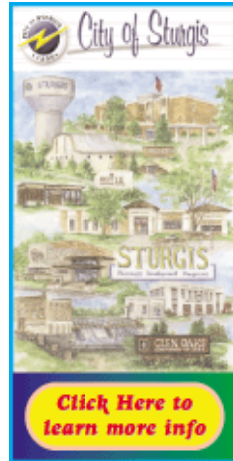
Hardly.

"These kids are broken," Bernie said.

"Sometimes you can't repair the damage."

Mary Rossman of the Michigan Children's Institute in Lansing framed the issue medically.

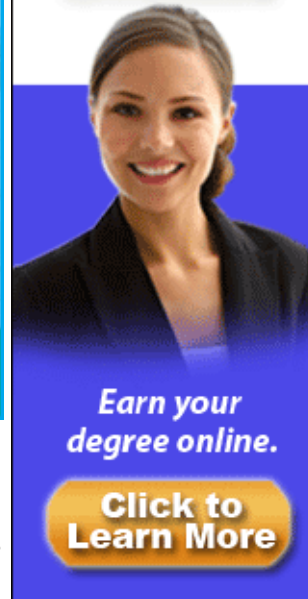
"You have to understand this is trauma, that



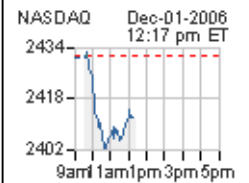
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it's like a medical model. The kids have not had one person to make them feel safe," Rossman said.

Children in these situations are fear-driven and exhibit survivor behavior, Rossman said.

That's why the Hales' role as foster parents was so difficult ??? and so critical to the long-term well-being of the 34 children they've taken in since 1994.

Their task was especially daunting with the Wal-Mart four.

"The first comment from the 4-year-old was, 'Do I get to sleep in a bed? Do I have to share it?' He was thrilled to have a bed of his own," Ame said.

The first night with new foster kids is challenging.

"They're always scared. They don't know what's happening," Bernie said.

"They cry," Ame said. "You talk to them, tell them they're going home (to the Hales' house). (Dad) will not know where you are. Being with an adult seems to calm them."

Utter neglect

The Wal-Mart four had been neglected in every possible way: medical, educational, emotional, nutritional, dental.

"The dental appointments were terrible," Ame said. "The 6-year-old had 19 cavities. The judge said it was the worst case of dental abuse he'd ever seen. They had to put caps on the baby teeth because he couldn't chew food," she said.

One sibling fared a bit better; he only had nine cavities.

The children were enrolled in the Burr Oak school system according to their emotional

maturity; educational maturity was nonexistent: the 8- and 10-year-olds had only had two months of schooling. Ever.

St. Joseph County Probate Judge Thomas Shumaker explained the context.

"When kids are under stress or negligence, they don't focus on education, they don't care about learning their ABC's. They wonder are they going to be alive the next morning," he said.

"The termination on this case was hard," Shumaker said. "It was terrible neglect. Ame sat there, took the stand (to testify), and faced that mother. She had to tell people how bad (off) these kids were," Shumaker said.

Borrowed time

Tuesday at Adoption Day, Shumaker recognized the Hales' years of dedication and hard work in foster parenting, but especially for the most recent four.

"This family had done an amazing job to get the (kids) ready for permanence. They were willing to make the effort long-term," Shumaker said. "It's not just the Hales, but they are a symbol of the people who do that, getting kids ready for that stability."

Stability is a process. It happens in the context of family.

"The kids become part of your family," Ame said. "They're your kids, even though they're just borrowed for a while."

And the kids thrive on that combination of stability and family.

"They just want to be part of a family," she said.

"Just being part of something, they're

learning," Bernie said. "They just want to do what families do."

So the Hales do those things. They camp in the backyard, take the kids to the Air Zoo and the fair, and take them to church.

Mealtime is an important socialization tool, they said.

"One of the real important things when we get kids is having the family table," Ame said. "Families just don't seem to eat around the table anymore, so kids lose table manners and being able to have a conversation with adults, and that's something really important you can teach them."

She remembered how basic the lessons were for one set of foster children who were living at a campground when DHS picked them up.

"We had kids that didn't know how to use silverware," Ame said. "They were 8, 6 and 4. Parents put a plate of food on the picnic table, they ate with their fingers."

Horror stories

The Hales can tell horrific stories about the neglect their various foster children have endured ??? the kids that protective services workers said slept like puppies, "just all on top of each other, so they could keep warm."

Or, the kids who didn't understand gifts.

"They wanted to know if at Christmastime, did they get to keep their presents," Bernie said. "With their parents, after the kids unwrapped the presents, the parents would return them to the store for the cash."

Or the kid who talked about his father's "hybrid tomato plants" (marijuana plants) that had to be kept hidden.

"Most of this stuff comes out as you're

taking the kids to the doctor, or at other times. They just volunteer the information. Something triggers it, they open up, tell you things the caseworker doesn't know," Bernie said.

'If we don't, who will?'

Bernie said many of their relatives don't understand why they are foster parents.

"We had our kids raised," he said. "But if we don't do it, who will? It's totally unreal, in our county, the number of kids that don't have a place to be. These kids don't deserve the life they've got," he said.

"No kid should have to live like that, wondering where the next meal is coming from or taking responsibility for their parents' actions," Ame said.

"There's got to be a breaking point, where you can make a difference, and this is it," Bernie said.

A week after the four had moved to their new "forever" family, one child's colorful weekly schedule was still pinned above his coat hook.

"I've not had the chance to take down the schedule," Ame said. "I'll just put another one up."

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